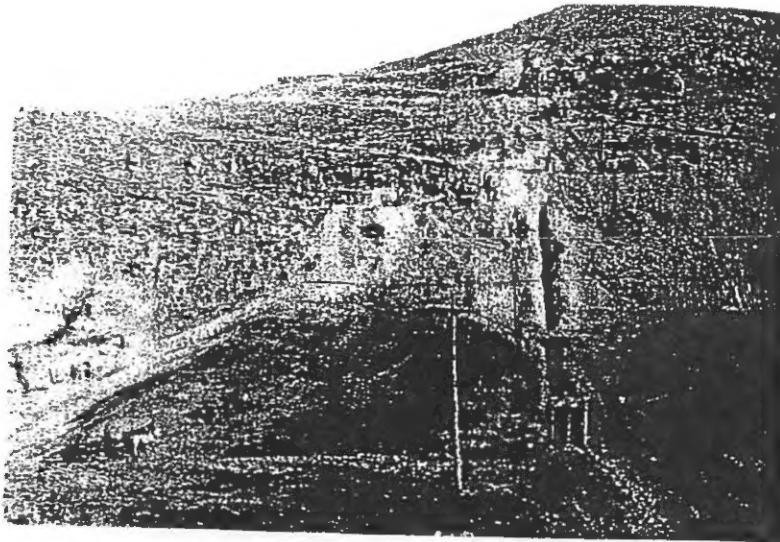


A HISTORY OF _____

*Wasatch
County*

Jessie L. Embry

1996
Utah State Historical Society
Wasatch County Commission



Early Construction Work at Deer Creek Reservoir. Deer Creek was built by the Bureau of Reclamation during the 1930s. Most of the water is transported to Utah and Salt Lake counties. (Utah State Historical Society)

In 1922 water users from Utah and Salt Lake counties looked for a place to build a reservoir. They considered a location a short distance downstream from Charleston where Main Creek from Round Valley and Deer Creek joined the Provo River. There were, however, problems with this site. Much of the community of Charleston would be buried by the dam, and the Denver and Rio Grande railroad line and the highway from Heber City to Provo ran through the center of the proposed dam and reservoir. Wasatch County farmers also feared that with the construction of the reservoir they would lose precious water rights.

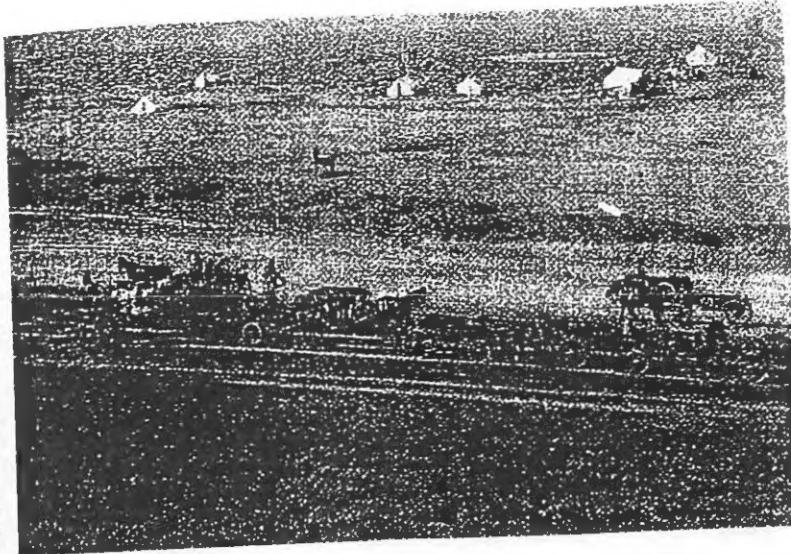
The Utah Water Storage Commission and federal reclamation planners, however, did not consider the Deer Creek project a top priority. Instead they constructed the Echo Dam in Summit County (begun in 1927) and the Hyrum Dam in Cache Valley (built between 1934 and 1936). As part of the Echo Dam project, the Weber-Provo diversion canal was constructed across the Kamas Valley in Summit County to the Provo River just below Francis. The purpose of this

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Work on the 150-foot earth fill dam on the Provo River. A CCC camp was built and CCC workers helped in the construction of Deer Creek Reservoir. (Utah State Historical Society)

diversion canal was to transfer water from the Weber River to water users in Utah and Great Salt Lake valleys.

A severe water shortage occurred in the Great Salt Lake and Utah valleys between 1931 and 1935. Utah Lake dropped from 850,000 acre-feet to 20,000 acre-feet. In response, residents in those valleys expressed renewed interest in building a reservoir at Deer Creek. Salt Lake City and other communities along the Wasatch Front joined efforts to convince the federal government to fund the construction of the reservoir. The state presented its reports to the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works in 1933 and the Provo River project received \$2,700,000 to build the reservoir and other facilities.¹⁷

Before work could start, communities benefiting were required to form water districts that would assume financial responsibility. In March 1935 a metropolitan water-district act passed the state legislature. Despite a challenge, it was upheld by the Utah Supreme Court in July. With the structure in place, Salt Lake City, Provo, Orem, Pleasant Grove, Lindon, American Fork, and Lehi voted to form met-

[when we watched out the window]. We'd hurry and get our work done so we could stand and watch them."²³

Although the dam was finished in 1941, the diversion canals and aqueduct systems to transfer the water to Salt Lake County were not. World War II slowed the project because labor and resources were needed in the war effort. The government closed all CCC camps on 25 July 1942, making these workers unavailable to complete the project. The canals were completed after the war, and the reservoir was filled for the first time on 14 June 1946. The dam was the second largest earth-filled dam built by the Bureau of Reclamation. It was 1,300 feet high and 1,000 feet wide at the base, used over 2.5 million cubic yards of earth and rock fill, and cost \$15 million. When completed, it captured 152,564 acre-feet of water from the Weber, Provo, and Duchesne rivers. Sixty percent of the water came from the Weber River.²⁴

What did Deer Creek mean to Wasatch County and the rest of Utah? Its immediate effect was to cover hundreds of acres of range-land and inundate two-thirds of Charleston. That town's population went from 343 in 1930 to 323 in 1940, a 5.5 percent drop. During the same period, Heber's population grew by 11 percent, Midway grew by 7.5 percent, and the rural areas of the county grew by 20.7 percent. The dam was responsible for some of those gains since government and contractor's employees moved to the area. From 1940 to 1943 the government continued to purchase land in Charleston, and its population continued to decline—from 323 to 175, a drop of nearly 50 percent. Deer Creek had other negative effects on Wasatch County. All valley residents lost some water rights. One resident, Calvin Giles, recalled that before Deer Creek Dam the residents had free use of the water; then "they started to put in weirs to measure water. In those days, we were used to taking all we wanted. But as time went on, they regulated the water and cut us down severely in the valley."²⁵ Like Strawberry Reservoir, Deer Creek Dam made Wasatch County an exporter of water to the more populated Wasatch Front.

Livestock

Federal policies also affected the livestock industry in the county. When the Forest Service continued to cut permits to protect the